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SUBJECT: YABLOKO AT A LOSS AFTER OCTOBER 8 ELECTIONS

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- 1B. MOSCOW 11388
- 1C. MOSCOW 07666
- 1D. MOSCOW 11413

Classified By: DCM Daniel A. Russell: 1.4 (b, d).

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Summary  
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11. (C) In an October 11 meeting, Yabloko Deputy Chairman Sergey Mitrokhin and Political Department Head Galina Mikhaleva said the party is facing an existential crisis following the poor results of the October 8 elections, where the party polled in the two percent range. Mitrokhin charged red tape, excessive financial controls, and government intervention hampered the party's ability to compete; others maintain Yabloko is vulnerable to charges of membership padding and embezzlement. Mitrokhin affirmed that the party will not merge with any of the other democratic opposition unless under its own terms, and labeled the second place Party of Life "the sovereign opposition." Time is running out for the opposition to unify, but Yabloko seems prepared for extinction. End Summary.

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Precedent Set in October 8 Elections  
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12. (C) Yabloko received 2.02 percent of the October 8 vote in Primorskiy Kray and 2.47 percent in Sverdlovsk Oblast, the only two regions where the party was on the ballot. Prior to the elections, the Russian Supreme Court barred Yabloko from participating in Karelia, saying that the local party branch did not have a quorum when it chose its candidates. Mikhaleva said, however, that the Justice Ministry had already registered the party, so there was no logic to the Supreme Court's decision in contradicting the Justice Ministry. She said Yabloko had a strong organization in Karelia with over 4500 members, and United Russia (YR) felt intimidated by the preliminary polls showing Yabloko with 20-30 percent in favor so it figured out a "legal" way to eliminate the competition. Mitrokhin claimed a dangerous precedent was set in Karelia: it was a sign to other governors and regional leadership that they can do the same thing with opposition parties in future elections (ref A).

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Death by Red Tape or Malfeasance or Duplicity  
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13. (C) Mikhaleva said that smaller parties -- such as Yabloko, Union of Right Forces, and the Republican Party -- were drowning in the red tape created by the new election

laws (ref B, C). In addition to the restrictions imposed by election laws passed in 2005 and 2006, the parties have to submit financial reports every 3 or 4 months and pay an elections deposit of USD 800,000 in Moscow and USD 3,000,000 in St. Petersburg. She said it is impossible to collect signatures without defects. For example, if a person wrote down Lenin St. instead of Lenin Street, that would be considered incorrect and not counted. She added that not having access to mass media was also a major problem and asked rhetorically "if Yabloko holds a public rally, but it is not covered by the media and only a few passers by see it, did it actually happen?"

¶14. (C) An alternate view was provided by Public Chamber member Andrey Przhezdomskiy, who separately told us that the Central Election Commissioner's office discovered numerous violations in party lists, which were padded with non-existent voters living on "Lenin Ave." or other, similarly eponymous streets. Yelena Mizulina, a Duma deputy for 10 years, first in Yabloko, then in the Union of Right Forces (SPS), who is now the government's representative to the Constitutional Court, said that Yabloko is the only party that maintains closed financial records and charges that Yavlinskiy does this specially to hide the fact that he misappropriates party funds. According to Mizulina, Yabloko can never agree to unite with any other party because that would require exposing the party financial records to more public scrutiny and that his conflicts with SPS leader Boris Nemtsov, et al., were just a pretense to prevent unification for other reasons.

¶15. (C) Moscow Helsinki Group Head Lyudmila Alekseyeva, who agrees in principle with Mikhaleva's contention that lack of media access impedes the formation of a real opposition, was caustic on recent accommodations by Yabloko. For a liberal,

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she maintained, there were no attractive political parties left. Both Yabloko and SPS, in declining to participate in the Other Russia conference and in silencing their public criticism of the President, had parted ways with significant portions of their base. The leaders were guilty, but Yavlinskiy most of all. Even if Yabloko and SPS were to merge, she predicted, they would fall short of the seven percent threshold absent a boost from "friends" in the Presidential Administration.

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A Merger Highly Unlikely  
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¶16. (C) Mitrokhin dismissed merging with SPS or the Republican Party, despite their proven success when they have united. Yabloko and SPS ran separately in the December 2003 Duma elections, and neither party reached the then-five percent threshold. But in December 2005, the two parties temporarily set aside their differences and joined forces to take part in the Moscow City Duma elections and cleared the 10 percent threshold. Their combined list garnered 11.1 percent of the vote. However, Mitrokhin said SPS is too tainted by the reforms in the 1990s and they can't see eye-to-eye with one another on most issues. He was almost derisive towards the Republican Party, saying that party head Vladimir Ryzhkov traveled to Astrakhan ten times before the vote and still only managed one percent. He said merging with the Democratic Party of Russia was also out of the question since it was a "Kremlin party." He said such parties were "spoilers" designed to siphon Yabloko's votes. He echoed Grigoriy Yavlinskiy's view that all other parties must subordinate themselves to Yabloko if they unite.

¶17. (C) Over the last 15 years, Yavlinskiy has never formed a coalition with anyone, except under his own leadership. Earlier in 2006, Yabloko incorporated the Green Party and Soldiers' Mothers as factions in the party because their leaders believed there was no other option since their

membership is below the 50,000 threshold for registration. In addition, a human rights faction was formed this year based on the national movement For Human Rights, led by Lev Ponomaryev. Mikhaleva said the factions function more or less independently within the party and retain their distinctiveness. However, the above three factions, combined with the womens' and youth factions, prevent Yabloko from successfully articulating a distinct political message.

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Re-Branding?  
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¶18. (C) Some Moscow political commentators have suggested that the only way for Yabloko to remain in the political landscape would be through re-branding. However, Mitrokhin categorically said Yabloko had no intention of re-branding itself. He commented rather sarcastically that the only way the party would re-brand itself would be to become non-democratic or change its name.

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Thoughts on Party of Life  
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¶19. (C) When asked about the excellent performance of the Russian Party of Life (RPL) in the October 8 elections (ref D) Mitrokhin called RPL "the sovereign opposition" and said that the Kremlin was trying to artificially imitate Western political structures. He said RPL was an administrative construction that was packed with Kremlin-backed bureaucrats and businesspeople.

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Comment  
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¶10. (C) Time is running out for Yabloko and the rest of the "democratic opposition" to unify, with December 1 the deadline for registering a new party combination for the next round of elections in 17 regions in March 2007. Moscow political circles are united in their bafflement over Yavlinskiy's insistence that he must be the center of any political merger, organized on his terms. As the October 8 regional elections indicated, it is a recipe for political extinction.

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